

CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY CHILD HEALTH

TOWARDS AN EARLY YEARS LEARNING FRAMEWORK FOR AUSTRALIA

CCCH Working Paper 4

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Preamble

The Australian Government is committed to the development of a national Early Years Learning Framework, and is planning a process of consultation with the early childhood sector about the nature and content of the Framework. This Discussion Paper is designed to provide policy makers and practitioners with an orientation to the issues involved.

Definitions

Within the early childhood sector, there is some variation in the use of key terms, such as curriculum, curriculum framework, pedagogy, early learning standards, and quality assurance standards. Below is a sampling of definitions of these key concepts.

- **Curriculum.** The simplest definition come from Kagan and Kauerz (2006) who define curriculum as the *content* of what is taught and what is learned. Other definitions broaden this to include everything children do, see, hear or feel in their setting, both planned and unplanned (Duffy, 2006; Qualifications and Curriculum Authority/Department for Education and Employment, 2000; Nuttall and Edwards, 2007).

Other definitions incorporate the role of early childhood professionals. The Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2006) see the curriculum as including the organization of the physical space, materials and activities that are designed to encourage learning processes, skills and the acquisition of specific information.

Similarly, the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services (NSW Department of Community Services, 2005) defines curriculum as the intentional provisions made by professionals to support children's learning and wellbeing. It refers to everything professionals do to support children's learning and development, the whole experience of the child and the child's family in the service.

According to the Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning (2006), a planned curriculum begins with an informed understanding of what children are capable of learning and how they learn effectively. It has specific goals for children that support self-regulation (behaviour, emotion, and attention), identity, social inclusion, health and wellbeing, language and thinking skills, and physical skills as well as the foundation knowledge and concepts needed for literacy and numeracy. It provides structure and direction for early childhood practitioners who support the development of capacities and skills while respecting a child's interests and choices.

- **Curriculum framework.** There is some divergence in the usage of the terms curriculum and curriculum frameworks. Nuttall and Edwards (2007) use the term *curriculum framework* to mean the actual curriculum texts or documents, whereas *curriculum* refers more broadly to 'everything that children experience in the early childhood education setting, whether intended or unintended by the educators' (p. 4). However, the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services is based on the opposite usage. A curriculum framework is more open-ended and less prescriptive than a traditional curriculum document. It aims to structure and support the curriculum decision-making process, and is a way of helping professionals to think about *how* they deliver services and *why* they do so in that way, rather than *what* they deliver. The NSW Curriculum Framework is not mandated, but acts as a powerful professional development tool that goes beyond existing regulations and quality assurance systems.

Bennett (2005) uses the term 'curriculum framework' or 'pedagogical framework' as a portmanteau term to include the following elements:

- A statement of the principles and values that should guide early childhood services;
- A summary of *program standards*, that is, how programs should be supported to facilitate development and learning (eg. reasonable child/staff ratios, high educator qualifications);
- A short outline of *content and outputs*, that is, of the knowledge, skills, dispositions and values that children at different ages can be expected to learn and master across broad developmental areas;
- *Pedagogical guidelines* outlining the processes through which children achieve the outcomes proposed (eg. experiential learning, play-based programming), and how educators should support them (eg. through adult interaction and involvement, enriched learning environments).

- **Pedagogy.** Watkins and Mortimore (1999) define pedagogy as ‘any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another’ (p. 3). In another similar account, pedagogy refers to the instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). It encompasses the interactive process between teacher and learner, and it is also applied to include the provision of some aspects of the learning environment (including the concrete learning environment, and the actions of the family and community).
- **Early learning standards / benchmarks.** Early learning standards (or benchmarks) are statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children across domains of development (Kagan, Britto, Kauerz and Tarrant, 2005; Kagan and Scott-Little, 2004). A statement of early learning standards or benchmarks is not an exhaustive guide to child development or a developmental checklist, and cannot be used as an assessment tool or as a curriculum (Kagan, Britto, Kauerz and Tarrant, 2005).

The central premise underlying the development of standards is that they are rooted in the cultural and national expectations of what the children residing in a given country should know and be able to do. The standards-based approach is rooted in research and scientific knowledge of the processes and consequences of early learning, taking into consideration cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences, as well as children with special needs. (Kagan and Britto, 2005)

- **Quality assurance / standards.** These are procedures for ensuring that all aspects of service – curriculum and learning standards, pedagogy, safety etc – are of high quality.

For the purposes of this Discussion Paper, an *early years curriculum or learning framework* is defined as a set of principles and practices to guide those working with young children in children’s services. It does not tell service providers what to do, but instead articulates the vision, goals and rationale for doing what they do. It is to be distinguished from a full *curriculum statement* (which might specify the content to be covered and / or the care and teaching processes to be used), and from *early learning standards or benchmarks* (that specify what young children should know and be able to do).

Why is this issue important?

By the time children reach school, there are striking disparities in their functioning across all developmental domains (Centre for Community Child Health and Telethon Institute for Child Health Research, 2007). These initial differences are predictive of later academic and occupational success (Boethel, 2004; Dockett and Perry, 2001, 2007; Le, Kirby, Barney, Setodji and Gershwin, 2006). The provision of high quality early childhood services can contribute greatly to reducing these gaps and thereby

contributing to more positive long term outcomes (Boethel, 2004; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2004).

One of the key features of high quality early learning and care programs is that there is a planned curriculum with goals for children's learning and development (Bertrand, 2007; Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; OECD, 2001, 2006; Schweinhart, 2008; Sylva, Melhuish, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2004). Research has consistently shown the importance of being clear about the purpose, goals and approaches in establishing the what (curriculum) and how (pedagogy or educational strategies) in early learning and child care programs (Bertrand, 2007). The use of such a curriculum in the context of nurturing and emotionally supportive relationships and settings can have a positive impact on children's long-term development and learning (Klein and Knitzer, 2006; Schweinhart, 2007, 2008).

However, the idea of a curriculum and even use of the term remains contentious within the early childhood sector (Elliot, 2006). Some have opposed the idea of a curriculum because of fears that it could be content rather than child driven. The term curriculum tends to be equated with syllabus and the notion of a prescriptive, subject-bound set of experiences to be followed in a fixed manner in all centres. Elliott (2006) argues that a curriculum framework that explicates broad developmental intentions and expectations, outlines program directions, foreshadows developmental outcomes and how they will be monitored can contribute significantly to ongoing learning success.

Despite the many strengths of early childhood services in Australia, there is a patchwork of provision and many children miss out on quality early education programs (Elliott, 2006; Walker, 2004). This reflects that fact that all three levels of government are involved in the provision of early childhood care and education services. In most states, policy responsibility is shared between a number of departments, including health, community services, and education (Press, 2006, 2008). However, in South Australia, Tasmania and Victoria, service policy is the sole responsibility of departments of education.

There is no national curriculum framework for the early years in Australia. This has led to significant differences in the content and organisation of curriculum for preschool across the country. Most of the states and Territories have developed curriculum guidelines, but there are variations in the age range covered, with several lacking any coverage of the birth to 3 year period. The only comprehensive, cohesive and mandatory curriculum framework across early childhood services in Australia is the *South Australian Curriculum Standards and Accountability Framework* (South Australian Department of Education, 2004).

One consequence of these regional variations is that there is no guarantee of consistent outcomes across Australia. Hence, there is an urgent need for more consistent and coherent policies across early childhood sectors and greater cohesiveness and integration within and between services in order to achieve better quality programs and better outcomes for children (Bennett, 2007; Doctors, Gebhard, Jones and Wat, 2008; Elliott, 2006; Press, 2008; Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006). This is not a

problem exclusive to Australia. Successive reviews of OECD countries have recommended greater coherence in early childhood policies and services (Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2001, 2006). The traditional division of the child into care, education, health, social welfare, or family components of early childhood and family support services undermines coherent policy-making and prevents an efficient use of resources (Bennett, 2003).

What does the research tell us?

An early learning framework should be based on an evidence-informed understanding of (a) how children develop and learn, (b) what conditions and experiences they need in order to develop and learn well, and (c) what the role of early childhood services should be. While there is much research to help us address the first two of these, determining the third involves debates about social values and understandings.

We know a great deal about how children develop and learn. **Key features of children's development and learning** that are particularly pertinent for the development of an early learning framework include the following:

- **Children develop and learn through their relationships with others** (Gerhardt, 2004; Richter, 2004; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Siegel, 1999, 2001). Early learning guidelines for infants and toddlers should acknowledge the importance of very young children's relationships with adults as the foundation of their learning (Petersen, Jones and McGinley, 2008).
- **Children's early childhood experiences are crucial for their later development** (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007, 2008): 'The quality of a child's early environment and the availability of appropriate experiences at the right stages of development are crucial in determining the strength or weakness of the brain's architecture, which, in turn, determines how well he or she will be able to think and to regulate emotions.' (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2008). Critical aspects of brain architecture begin to be shaped by experience before and soon after birth, and many fundamental aspects of that architecture are established well before a child enters school.
- **Learning starts from birth** (Lally, 2007; Meisels, 2006; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). It is therefore important to focus on the early childhood stage of development, particularly in situations of child poverty, ill health or special need (Bennett, 2007; Meisels, 2006; OECD, 2006). Research shows that starting early has more impact than starting late. As brain circuits are built up and stabilize over time, they become increasingly more difficult to alter. Early intervention makes sense economically and has greater potential for closing the persistent and pernicious achievement gaps.
- **Children's learning is cumulative**: 'Skill begets skill, learning begets learning' (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, and Masterov, 2006). Therefore, it is important to build a strong platform of skills from birth.

- ***Children are active participants in their own development*** (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Siegel, 1999; Thompson, 2001). They are not passive recipients of input from parents and caregivers, but active partners in transactional exchanges from birth. As they develop, they can increasingly become able to be meaningfully engaged as partners by those who care for and work with them, so that their views are included in the planning, delivery and evaluation of services (Lancaster, 2006; Lansdown, 2005).
- ***Learning involves many aspects of children's functioning, not just cognitive processes*** (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin and Hustedt, 2005; Cunha and Heckman, 2006; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, and Masterov, 2006; Galinsky, 2006; Heckman, Stixrud and Urzua, 2006; Raver and Knitzer, 2002). Other aspects include emotional development, attention-related skills (such as persistence and self-regulation), relationship skills, problem-solving skills, learning how to learn. Long-term academic and social functioning depend upon the development of all these aspects of skills. Attention-related skills such as persistence and self-regulation predict academic achievement independently of cognitive ability (Duncan, Dowsett, Claessens, Magnuson, Huston, Klebanov, Pagani, Feinstein, Engel, Brooks-Gunn, Sexton, Duckworth and Japel, 2007).

We also know a great deal about the conditions that children need to develop and learn well. The conditions that are most relevant to the development of an early learning framework include general findings about early childhood services and specific findings about principles of effective service delivery. ***General findings about early childhood services*** include the following:

- ***Children benefit from attendance at high quality early childhood services***, both in the short- and long-term (Barnett, Brown and Shore, 2004; Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin and Hustedt, 2005; Doherty, 2007; Early Childhood Knowledge Centre, 2006; Elliott, 2006; Gormley, 2007; Howes, Bryant, Burchinal, Clifford, Early, Pianta, Barbarin and Ritchie, 2006; Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008; Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart, Grabbe and Barreau, 2007; Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006). Early childhood development programs have a positive effect on preventing delay of cognitive development and increasing readiness to learn (Anderson, Shinn, Fullilove, Scrimshaw, Fielding, Normand, Carande-Kulis and the Task Force on Community Preventive Services, 2003; Howes, Bryant, Burchinal, Clifford, Early, Pianta, Barbarin and Ritchie, 2006; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2007). High quality early childhood programs have more positive effects, especially for children from disadvantaged backgrounds (Elliott, 2006; Magnuson, Ruhm and Waldfogel, 2007; Melhuish, Quinn, Hanna, Sylva, Sammons, Siraj-Blatchford and Taggart, 2006).
- ***Child care and education functions are integrated*** (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Brauner, Gordic and Zigler, 2004; CCCH, 2007; Elliot, 2006; Friendly, 2008; Gallagher, Clifford and Maxwell, 2004; Press, 2006; Work and Family

Policy Roundtable, 2006). Care and learning are inseparable concepts: 'Since all quality early childhood settings provide both care and education, a caring, nurturing environment that supports learning and early development is an essential component of a framework for early learning' (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006). Elliott (2006) argues that it is 'conceptually and ethically inappropriate to separate the care and education functions'.

The belief that care and education cannot be separated is built into some of the existing curriculum frameworks, such as the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services (NSW Department of Community Services, 2005) and the UK's Early Years Foundation Stage framework (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008). The latter is intended for use by anyone who has time with the child. All providers are seen as having an equally important role to play in children's early years experiences and all types of providers have the potential to deliver the Early Years Foundation Stage to an excellent standard.

The younger the child, the more important it is to recognise the inseparability of care and learning: 'Every moment in which an adult provides care to a young infant is a moment rich with learning.' (Lally, 2007). Thus, the infant care is neither a babysitter nor a trainer / teacher, but rather 'a loving facilitator of emotional, cognitive, language, physical, and social competence' (Lally, 2007). With infants, good teaching and good caring occur with emotional support and facilitation of learning and development happening simultaneously (Hauser-Cram, Warfield, Shonkoff, & Krauss, 2001). Accordingly, Lally (2007) recommends that early childhood programs should recognise importance of infants and toddlers having the freedom to make learning choices and to experience the world on their own terms, and should therefore de-emphasize teaching and emphasize learning.

- **Core early childhood services are provided on a universal rather than a targeted basis** (Barnett, Brown and Shore, 2004; Bennett, 2007; CCCH, 2006; Doherty, 2007; OECD, 2001; Press, 2006). An OECD review of early childhood education and care policies in OECD countries (including Australia)(OECD, 2001; Bennett, 2007) suggested that a universal approach to early childhood access is more effective than targeting particular groups. In universal systems, coverage is greater for all children (including for targeted groups) and quality tends to be better. However, particular attention should be given to children in need of special support, or from ethnic or low-income backgrounds. Targeting is therefore appropriate as a secondary strategy.
- **Comprehensive and holistic services from birth to school age yield benefits that are as great or greater than preschool services alone** (Morrissey and Warner, 2007).

In addition to these general findings about early childhood services, there are specific findings about principles of effective service delivery. These include both interpersonal and structural features. **Key interpersonal features of effective early childhood services** include the following:

- **Responsive and caring adult-child relationships are critical for effective service delivery** (Lally, 2007; Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Melhuish, 2003; Moore, 2006). For infants and toddlers, forming attachments with caregivers is particularly (Lally, 2007). The recognition of the importance of relationships for children's development is central to many of contemporary curriculum frameworks, eg. the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services – *The Practice of Relationships* (NSW Department of Community Services, 2005), and *Te Whāriki: The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996; May and Carr, 2000).

Relationships with staff also need to be consistent and secure, so staff continuity is an important issue (David, 2003), especially for very young children (Elliott, 2006). For children under three, consistency and secure relationships with key workers are significant features of effective practice (BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003). This has implications for staff rostering as well as staff retention and turnover.

- **Parents and families are recognized as having the primary role in rearing children and are actively engaged by early childhood services** (Bennett, 2007; Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; David, 2003; Elliott, 2006; Kagan, Britto, Kauerz and Tarrant, 2005; Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008; OECD, 2006; *Te Whāriki* - New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum Framework). This involves building strong links between home and the early childhood setting (David, 2003; Farquhar, 2003) and developing partnerships between parents and early childhood providers (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002; Stonehouse, 2001a, 2001b). Partnerships with families and communities strengthen the ability of early childhood settings to meet the needs of young children. Where a special relationship in terms of shared educational aims has been developed with parents, and pedagogic efforts are made at home to support the children, good developmental outcomes may be achieved even if the parents are not using consistently good teaching practices. Only supporting the parents' needs or involving them as helpers does not appear to influence children's developmental progress (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002).

The continuity of children's experience from home to centre is critical (Bennett, 2007; Lally, 2007; BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003; Bertram and Pascal, 2002; Lloyd-Jones, 2002; Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008; OECD, 2006). Lloyd-Jones (2002) argues that, for very young children, best practice in early childhood services must match the qualities of good home environments. Similarly, Lally (2007) recommends that effective caregiving should include family practices as part of care.

- **An individualised and developmentally appropriate approach is used** (David, 2003; Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008; Kagan and Kauerz, 2006; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007; Melhuish, 2003). In the UK's *Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008), providers should deliver individualised learning, development and care that enhances the development of the children in their care and gives those children the best possible

start in life. Every child should be supported individually to make progress at their own pace. For infants and toddlers, responsive care means looking for cues and adapting, having respect for the child, having acute powers of observation, slowing down and allowing the child to set the pace for learning (Lally, 2007).

An individualized approach implies that children who are vulnerable (that is, are experiencing developmental difficulties) and are experiencing difficulties with the social and emotional demands of early childhood settings should receive extra support to help them participate meaningfully in all activities (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008).

- **Early childhood staff build upon children's interests, previous learning experiences and strengths** (BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003; David, 2003). Recognising and building on children's competencies is a key feature of the NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services – *The Practice of Relationships* (NSW Department of Community Services, 2005), and *Te Whāriki: The New Zealand Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1996; May and Carr, 2000).
- **Staff observe and monitor children's performance to ensure the provision of challenging yet achievable experiences** (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; David, 2003; Fleer and Richardson, 2004; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Monitoring should not take the form of assessment based on developmental checklists, but on observation of and engagement with each child to understand what they know and can do, and how they can be helped to extend their understanding and develop new skills. Staff support children in meeting new challenges through praise and encouragement (David, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002)
- **Staff model appropriate language, values and practices** (David, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). With infants and toddlers, caregivers need to understand that infants imitate and incorporate their behaviours and attitudes: significant aspects of the way they act are being perceived, interpreted and incorporated into the actual definition of self the child is forming (Lally, 2007). The UK's *Early Years Foundation Stage* framework (Department for Children, Schools and Families, 2008) sees providers as having a responsibility to ensure positive attitudes to diversity and difference – not only so that every child is included and not disadvantaged, but also so that they learn from the earliest age to value diversity in others and grow up making a positive contribution to society.
- **A play-based approach is used** (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Bodrova and Leong, 2003; Dau, 1999; Elkind, 2006; Hewes, 2006; Stonehouse, 1999; Walker, 2007). Play is child-centred activity that engages a young child and promotes learning (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006). Play is how children make sense of the world and is an effective method of learning for young children. Ideas and skills become meaningful; tools for learning are practiced; and,

concepts are understood. Play engages children's attention when it offers a challenge that is within the child's capacity to master.

Not all types of play promote learning. Bodrova and Leong (2003) distinguish between immature play (which is repetitive and unimaginative) and mature play (which is more complex and more sustained, involves multiple roles and symbolic uses of props, has more clearly defined rules, involves more negotiation and a greater use of language). Mature play contributes to children's learning and development in many areas that immature play does not affect. Bodrova and Leong describe ways in which preschool teachers can support this form of play.

The role of the adult is to create exciting places and opportunities for young children to explore, experiment and practice new skills (Stonehouse, 1999). Once a safe environment of this kind has been created, good caregiving involves handing control over to young children: 'It is not so much what is offered by adults to children in early childhood programs that makes it play or not-play, but rather how it is offered, and how much control and freedom children are given to construct the experience on their own terms' (Stonehouse, 1999, p. 152). In a play-based pedagogy, play should be planned and purposeful, and should provide children with challenging and worthwhile activities (BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003).

Many early childhood curricula see a major role for play. For instance, the UK's *Early Years Foundation Stage* framework (Department for Children, School and Families, 2008) identifies a number of areas of learning and development, all of which should be delivered through planned, purposeful play.

- ***Children are active and engaged*** (Elliott, 2006; Kagan, Britto, Kauerz and Tarrant, 2005; Kagan and Kauerz, 2006; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007; McWilliam and Casey, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Children learn best by exploring and thinking about all sorts of phenomena. As such, children need to be active in their learning, not just cognitively, but also physically, socially, and artistically. Effective curriculum ensures that important concepts are taught through projects, every day experiences, collaborative activities, and an active curriculum (Kagan and Kauerz, 2006). Learning comes from a process of cognitive construction that is only achieved when the child is motivated and involved (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Young children are active agents in their own learning: they learn best in appropriately resourced environments where they are supported by receptive and psychologically available adults, who are knowledgeable about how children learn (BERA Early Years Special Interest Group, 2003). At the heart of appropriate pedagogies is the ability of practitioners to structure environments that promote optimum engagement for children (Elliott, 2006).
- ***Staff are also active and engaged and use intentional teaching strategies*** (Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008; Pianta, 2007; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). It is the teacher's implementation of a curriculum, through both social and instructional interactions with children, that produces effects on student learning (Pianta, 2007). Educators need to be actively engaged with children:

the best early childhood teachers are opportunists - they know child development and exploit children's interests and their interactions with them to promote developmental change (Pianta, 2007). To be effective, teachers of young children must strategically weave instruction into activities that give children choices to explore and play. Several aspects of teachers' interactive behaviors appear to uniquely predict gains in young children's achievement: explicit instruction in certain key skills, sensitive and emotionally warm interactions, responsive feedback, verbal engagement/stimulation, and a classroom environment that is not overly structured or regimented (Pianta, 2007).

- ***Adults and children engage in a process of cognitive 'co-construction'*** (Farquhar, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Each party engages with the understanding of the other and learning is achieved through a process of reflexive 'co-construction'. A necessary condition is that both parties are *involved*, and, for the resultant learning to be worthwhile, that the content should be in some way *instructive*. Adult-child interactions that involve some element of 'sustained shared thinking' or what Bruner has termed 'joint involvement episodes' are especially valuable in terms of children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002).
- ***There is a balance of child-initiated and teacher-directed approaches*** (David, 2003; Graves, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002; Pianta, 2007). Effective teaching in the early years involves a balance between a teacher-directed, programmed learning approach, and an open framework approach where children are provided with 'free' access to a range of instructive learning environments in which adults support children's learning (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). A child-centred approach where the adults aim is to provide a stimulating yet open-ended environment for children to play within is insufficient on its own (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). On the other hand, children's learning can be slowed by overly academic preschool experiences that introduced formalized learning experiences too early for most children's developmental status (David, 2003; Marcon, 1999, 2002). Similarly, a heavy emphasis upon direct teaching and programmed instruction should be avoided in the early years (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Instead, there should be a more equal emphasis on free play and direct learning. Children's later school success are enhanced by more active, child-initiated learning experiences in preschool.

For infants and toddlers, Lally (2007) recommends de-emphasising teaching and emphasising learning. Rather than teaching specific lessons, the focus should be on facilitating natural interests and urges to learn by providing close and responsive relationships with caregivers; designing safe, interesting and appropriate environments; giving infants uninterrupted time to explore; and interacting with infants in ways that emotionally and intellectually support their discovery and learning.

- ***The social setting is organised in ways that support learning*** (Farquhar, 2003). Teachers foster a 'community of learning' approach where there are many and varied opportunities for collaboration and social learning.
- ***There is a balance between a cognitive / academic focus and a social / emotional focus*** (Blair, 2002; Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin and Hustedt, 2005; Frede and Ackerman, 2006; Mitchell, Wylie and Carr, 2008; Raver and Knitzer, 2002). Both aspects of children's development are important, and support each other. Social and emotional development is important both in its own right and because aspects of it facilitate cognitive development. Long-term academic / school success is dependent as much on social, emotional and self-regulatory capacities as upon academic skills and knowledge (Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin and Hustedt, 2005; Cunha and Heckman, 2006; Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, and Masterov, 2006; Heckman, Stixrud and Urzua, 2006; Raver and Knitzer, 2002).

Effective early childhood services promotes early literacy and numeracy skills (Doig, McCrae and Rowe, 2003; Duncan et al, 2005; Fler and Raban, 2007). However, it is how these are 'taught' that is crucial: while preparation for school is necessary, didactic classrooms do not support effectively the holistic development of young children, in particular, their creative capacities, and their socio-emotional and physical development (Bennett, 2007)

Effective early childhood services also promote the development of emotional and self-regulatory skills (Bodrova and Leong, 2006; Boyd, Barnett, Bodrova, Leong, Gomby, Robin and Hustedt, 2005; Cohen, Onunaku, Clothier and Poppe, 2005; Hyson, 2004; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007; Raver and Knitzer, 2002; Weare and Gray, 2003). Social and emotional development is important both in its own right and because aspects of it facilitate cognitive development.

- ***Social skills are promoted by working through conflicts*** (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden and Bell, 2002). Effective early childhood settings support children in being assertive, at the same time as helping them rationalise and talk through their conflicts. Children have better social/behavioural developmental outcomes in setting where staff consistently help them talk through conflicts, and pro-actively support the children in developing their social skills (eg. through story books and group discussions to work through common conflicts). In settings which are less effective in this respect, there was often no follow up on children's misbehaviour, or children are 'distracted' from interfering with other children, or simply instructed to stop.
- ***Respect for diversity, equity and inclusion are prerequisites for optimal development and learning*** (Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Kagan and Kauerz, 2006, MacNaughton, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2006). During the preschool years, children become aware of various forms of diversity - cultural and racial, developmental, gender, and socio-economic (MacNaughton, 2006). Some aspects of their identities (eg. gender) are shaped by early childhood service

provider's assumptions and behaviours (MacNaughton, 1999, 2000). Although the research is incomplete, there is some evidence that some of the views and attitudes that children develop during this period may be formative. There is limited research on what strategies best promote young children's acceptance of diversity, but what there is suggests that the most effective approaches involve sustained efforts by early childhood professionals to actively engage children in discussions and direct teaching (MacNaughton, 2006).

Cultural sensitivity is critical (Corso, Santos and Roof, 2002; Gonzalez-Mena, 2004; Klein and Knitzer, 2006, 2007; MacNaughton, 1999; NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services, 2005; Siraj-Blatchford, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford and Clarke, 2000). Cultural sensitivity involves not just awareness of the cultural practices and values of children from culturally and linguistically different backgrounds, but also respect, reciprocity and responsiveness (Barrera, Corso and Macpherson, 2003),

Another sense in which early childhood professionals need cultural sensitivity is in being aware of the ways in which some aspects of development and learning are socially and culturally constructed, rather than being universal properties of children (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, 1999; Fler, 2006).

- ***The physical setting is organised in ways that promote learning*** (Farquhar, 2003; Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2006, 2007). Children's cognitive development in school is related to the number and variety of equipment and materials available to them in preschool settings (Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2006, 2007). Early childhood settings also need to be safe and sanitary (Melhuish, 2003).
- ***Daily routines are used to strengthen bonds and support learning*** (Lally, 2007). This is particularly important for infants and toddlers where the daily routines of caring for infants and toddlers provide times to enhance intimacy between the carer and infant, strengthen bonds, and yet provide opportunities for learning. Routines are more than just care taking. They are opportunities for one-to-one contact and a time when many different types of learning take place. Each daily routine offers a different opportunity for learning. Routines are especially important for young children (Lally, 2007) and for children with developmental disabilities (McWilliam and Casey, 2007; Noonan and McCormick, 2005).

Besides the interpersonal features just listed, there are several ***structural features of effective early childhood services***. There is a strong association between the ability of staff to create a sound early learning environment and the key structural features of group size (number of children in a class), staff-child ratio, and caregiver qualifications (years of education, child-related training, and years of experience)(CCCH PB 2, 2006; Cleveland, Corter, Pelletier, Colley, Bertrand and Jamieson, 2006; Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, 2006). Smaller group sizes and favourable staff-child ratios allow each child to receive individual attention and foster strong relationships with caregivers (Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, 2006; Graves, 2006; Melhuish, 2003; Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006).

Since the curriculum is only as good as the people who deliver it (Duffy, 2006), having well-trained staff and ongoing staff development and support is essential (Bennett, 2007; Best Start Expert Panel on Early Learning, 2006; Duffy, 2006; Early Childhood Learning Knowledge Centre, 2006; Elliott, 2006; Melhuish, 2003; OECD, 2001; Saracho and Spodek, 2007; Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006). Specialised training contributes to quality interactions and rich child-centred contexts (Elliott, 2006). Children make better progress when early childhood practitioners are professionally qualified and possess sound, sensitive pedagogic approaches and knowledge. In the case of early childhood teachers, the more highly qualified they are, the more progress children make subsequently (Montie, Xiang and Schweinhart, 2006, 2007).

Another key structural feature is staff continuity (David, 2003), which is particularly important for very young children (Elliott, 2006). Young children need stability in their relationships with caregivers and teachers, so staff rosters should be arranged with this in mind. In addition, to reduce staff turnover, staff need fair working conditions and remuneration rates that are sufficiently generous to recruit and retain a qualified and committed workforce (Work and Family Policy Roundtable, 2006).

It should be noted that all of these structural features are necessary but not sufficient conditions for high quality services – they should be understood as means to an end (the end being the delivery of services according to the key principles above). As Pianta (2007) notes, it is the teacher's implementation of a curriculum, through both social and instructional interactions with children, that produces effects on student learning. Structural indicators, such as the curriculum being used, teacher credentials, and other program factors, are only proxies for the instructional and social interactions children have with teachers in classrooms. Thus, it is not teacher qualifications per se that affect outcomes but the ability of the staff member to create a better care and learning environment that makes the difference (Sammons, Sylva, Melhuish, Siraj-Blatchford, Taggart and Elliot, 2003).

The third element of an early learning framework involves deciding what the **role of early childhood services** should be. It has been argued that there needs to be widespread support for a long-term vision, a set of goals, and core principles regarding a high-quality, comprehensive early childhood system (Doctors, Gebhard, Jones and Wat, 2008) and a national curriculum framework (Elliot, 2006; Press, 2006). This framework should be a concise statement of principles and values that reflect the overall vision of what sort of society we want and what the underlying purposes of early childhood services are (Moss, 2007).

It should be recognised that gaining such agreement will not be easy, since it raises questions that cannot be settled by research evidence alone but involves social, political and ethical choices (Moss and Petrie, 2002; Nuttall and Edwards, 2007). The curriculum that any given community develops for its children reflects its contemporary social concerns, dominant beliefs and understandings, as well as what outcomes it wants for its children (Duffy, 2006; Nuttall and Edwards, 2007). These do not remain constant, but continue to evolve as our understanding of child development and our views about

childhood change. Therefore, the early years learning framework should be framed in such a way that will allow it to grow and evolve as our knowledge and views change (Duffy, 2006).

There is a variety of ways of thinking about early childhood and about the purposes of early childhood services, and each of these perspectives has implications for how early childhood services are structured and delivered (Moss and Petrie, 2002). There are differences of opinion regarding the aims of early childhood, both within the early childhood field and outside (MacNaughton, 2003; Moss, 2007; Press, 2008; Soler and Miller, 2003):

- Moss (2007) distinguishes between an instrumental perspective (in which early childhood services are seen as preparing children for their later involvement in education and employment settings) and a democratic perspective (in which early childhood services are viewed as providing settings in which children and adults can participate collectively in shaping decisions affecting themselves). (Moss notes a third perspective - the market perspective – in which early childhood services are seen as businesses competing in a private market, offering a commodity to parents.)
- Press (2008) distinguishes between instrumentalist models (which tend to be more prescriptive) and socio-cultural models (which recognise and allow for an active role for children).
- Soler and Miller (2003) also identify an instrumentalist (or vocationalist) approach, in contrast to a progressive approach based on the view that ‘the curriculum should serve the intrinsic aim of providing a value in its own right, so that it is seen as self-fulfilling and providing experiences that are worthwhile’ (p. 57). The instrumental or vocational view stresses the authority of the adult over the child and the needs of society over those of the individual, whereas the progressive view emphasises the autonomy of the individual child and a different, less controlling role for the teacher.
- Another way of classifying early childhood curricula is offered by MacNaughton (2003) who categorises them according to whether they view the role of education as one of conforming to society, reforming society, or transforming society.

All of the above accounts contrast an instrumental perspective with another perspective variously described as progressive, socio-cultural, democratic or reforming / transforming. Soler and Miller (2003) suggest that different curriculum statements can be seen as falling at different points along a continuum from instrumental to progressive orientations. Thus, the UK *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage* (Department of Children, Schools and Families, 2008a) is underpinned by an instrumentalist perspective, the Italian *Reggio Emilia* model (Edwards, Gandini and Forman, 1993; Millikan, 2003) exemplifies the progressive perspective, and New Zealand’s *Te Whāriki* Early Childhood Curriculum (Ministry of Education, 1996) occupies a middle ground between the two.

Another dimension on which approaches to early childhood services can be placed was identified through the OECD thematic review of early childhood education and care policy (Bennett, 2005; OECD, 2006). This described two broad curricula approaches: the social pedagogic approach and the pre-primary approach. As summarised by Bertrand (2007), social pedagogic practices, common in Scandinavian countries, New Zealand, and Italy, combine a broad developmental framework with local curriculum development. The focus is on developmental goals, interactivity with educators and peers, and a high quality of life in the early childhood setting. The curriculum has broad orientations for children rather than prescribed outcomes, and the acquisition of developmental skills is perceived as a by-product rather than as the driver of the curriculum. This approach is in contrast to the pre-primary practices, common in France, United Kingdom, and the United States, that are characterized by centralized development of the curriculum, often with detailed goals and outcomes that determine or influence curriculum decisions about what and how children learn. The goals and outcomes are often stated as learning standards or learning expectations and are related to school readiness tasks and skills. Educators tend to interact with children around activities related to the identified learning expectations and rely more on direct instruction strategies. This approach is sometimes referred to as the 'schoolification' of the early years (OECD, 2006).

In practice, most jurisdictions use approaches that blend elements of both these approaches, but lean towards either a pre-primary approach or a social pedagogic approach. According to Bennett (2005), although little research to evaluate the two traditions has been undertaken, experienced curriculum authors in the early childhood field today tend to see curriculum for young children in the broad terms favoured by the social pedagogic tradition.

In the US, the emphasis has been upon developing early learning standards. These are statements that describe expectations for the learning and development of young children across domains of development (Kagan, Britto, Kauerz and Tarrant, 2005; Kagan and Scott-Little, 2004). The key domains of development vary, but usually include physical well-being and motor development, cognition, social and emotional development, language and literacy, and approaches towards learning (Kagan and Britto, 2005). The central premise underlying the development of standards is that they represent the cultural and national expectations of what the children residing in a given country should know and be able to do. The standards-based approach is rooted in research and scientific knowledge of the processes and consequences of early learning, taking into consideration cultural, linguistic, and socioeconomic differences, as well as children with special needs (Kagan and Britto, 2005).

The move to develop learning standards for early childhood services is a flow-on from the movement to improve student achievement through stronger accountability for schools, which is one of the most significant recent developments in the field of education in the US (Kagan and Scott-Little, 2004). Given the increasing recognition of the importance of the early years for subsequent development and learning, it was inevitable that this movement would also be applied to early childhood services, despite the early childhood field's scepticism about the appropriateness of such moves (Kagan

and Scott-Little, 2004). Most US states have now developed statements of early learning standards or guidelines for preschool-age children (Scott-Little, Lesko, Martella and Milburn, 2007) and some are now developing them for infants and toddlers as well (Scott-Little, Kagan, Frelow and Reid, 2008).

Peak bodies in the US have published recommendations for the development of early learning guidelines for preschool children (National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2002) and for infants and toddlers (Petersen, Jones and McGinley, 2008). The view adopted by the peak early childhood bodies in the US (National Association for the Education of Young Children and National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, 2002) is that early learning standards can be a valuable part of a comprehensive, high-quality system of services for young children, contributing to young children's educational experiences and to their future success. But these results can be achieved only if early learning standards: (1) emphasize significant, developmentally appropriate content and outcomes; (2) are developed and reviewed through informed, inclusive processes; (3) use implementation and assessment strategies that are ethical and appropriate for young children; and (4) are accompanied by strong supports for early childhood programs, professionals, and families.

If an early years learning framework is to be adopted wholeheartedly by the early childhood sector, it will be important to gain widespread agreement and commitment from practitioners for the overall vision and the underlying principles and practices. Gaining such agreement takes time (eg. the process used to develop *Síolta*: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education in Ireland took three years), but such investment of time and financial resources is well worth it (Petersen, Jones and McGinley, 2008).

One of the issues to be settled is what age range an early years learning framework should cover. The needs of infants and toddlers have been relatively neglected until recently and are still not adequately covered by all existing state and Territory curriculum statements. Many of the curriculum statements reflect this bias, and do not serve well as frameworks for working with younger children. This is an international phenomenon rather than one peculiar to Australia (Bennett, 2003; OECD, 2001). The evidence suggests that comprehensive and holistic services from birth to school age yield benefits that are as great or greater than preschool services alone (Morrissey and Warner, 2007). There are even arguments for including the prenatal period (Doctors, Gebhard, Jones and Wat, 2008).

There is also a debate about whether an early years learning framework should go to age 5 or age 8. The continuity of young children's experiences between different settings (home and early childhood setting, early childhood setting and school) is critical for effective early learning (Bertram and Pascal, 2002). Because of the importance of ensuring a smooth transition from early childhood services to school, there have been increasing calls for more integrated curriculum and teaching between early childhood and early school years (CCCH, 2008). Hence, it is argued that a 0-8 years system is

preferable on the grounds that a shared curriculum framework can act as a unifying influence across services for different age groups (Press, 2008; Reynolds, Magnuson and Ou, 2006).

Finally, there is the question of what the scope and function of an early years learning framework should be, and what should be included. In terms of scope and function, an early years learning framework should provide

- parents and the general public with an understanding of what early childhood services are aiming to achieve and how they do this.
- early childhood practitioners with guidelines to help them provide young children with the best possible care and early learning environments, and
- governments with ways of ensuring that early childhood services are being delivered effectively.

As for what should be included, reviews of different curriculum and early years learning frameworks in Australia and overseas (Bertram and Pascal, 2002; OECD, 2001, 2006; Press, 2008) reveal much variety in form and content. However, there are some general features that appear in most frameworks. To perform the above functions, an early years learning framework should include statements regarding

- the overall vision and goals for children and the role of early childhood services in achieving these,
- the key principles on which service delivery should be based,
- the outcomes that early childhood services can be expected to achieve and how these will be monitored, and
- what aspects of children's learning and development should be covered.

An early years learning framework should be concise rather than exhaustive, and provide guidance rather than being prescriptive, leaving room for local and individual applications at state, local, centre and personal levels (Moss, 2007).

What are the implications of this research?

- An early years learning framework should contain the following elements;
 - overall aims and outcomes
 - principles
 - scope / content
 - broad standards
- If a national early years learning framework is to influence practice, then it must be acceptable to and taken up by practitioners – a document that does not build upon current practices and understandings will not be useable to or used by early childhood staff

- To ensure that this happens, an extensive period of consultation and development is needed
- Although curriculum might not be the most appropriate term for describing the learning environment for children below the age of three, we do need to recognise that learning is taking place and that we need to understand how best to promote it.

Considerations for policy and programs

- A national early childhood curriculum framework is needed – this needs to be based on agreement between all stakeholders
- This should be a curriculum framework rather than a formal curriculum
- The framework should apply to all children from birth to 6 (or 8) and all early childhood service settings
- Training implications – how to train and support EC service providers – (link to competencies paper)
- Consideration needs to be given to how the framework links with quality assurance guidelines and with the rating system foreshadowed in Labor party policy
- Gain general agreement and support for a broad vision regarding how best to support children from birth to school age, and developed a focused strategy to begin to implement this vision.

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